

A CRASH COURSE IN TEEN PROGRAMMING: HOSTING TERRY TRUEMAN AT ANDERSON PUBLIC LIBRARY'S READ 'N' FEED

by Beth Hull



"You know, our Teen Librarian hosts a READ 'N' FEED every year. You up for it?" Those were the words of my manager shortly after I was hired as the new Teen Librarian. READ 'N' FEED? What the heck was that? Soon enough, I discovered *exactly* what a READ 'N' FEED was, but before I had any idea of the adventure I was embarking upon, I replied, "Sure!" Ah, the enthusiasm of the ignorant.

A READ 'N' FEED is defined as a "unique book discussion experience that features fiction, food, fun and fellowship." This definition is found in *Fiction, Food, and Fun: The Original Recipe for the READ 'N' FEED Program* by Kathryn Closter, Karen Sipes, and Vickie Thomas, all fabulous Anderson area teachers. These amazing ladies began the READ 'N' FEED in Anderson, Indiana, and created a book based on their experiences. In the forward, author Caroline Cooney (yes, *that* Caroline Cooney) recalls, "...having visited many more schools, I wrote, 'Anderson was a hard act to follow, and sure enough, nobody else measured up.'" Oh boy, what had I gotten myself into? I asked the former Teen Librarian, Brad Howell, for a list of authors that had already visited and was reduced to near tears. The previous guests included Sonya Sones, Meg Cabot, Sharon Draper, Pete Hautman, and Margaret Peterson Haddix, just to name a few. It became very clear that planning my first READ 'N' FEED was not going to be a cakewalk. Where did I even begin with something like this?

After a lot of deep breathing and talking to myself, I decided the starting point was to find an author. In my searches, I discovered some great resources, one being a database called Authors 4 Teens.¹ While there is a cost for subscribing to this great resource, Greenwood Electronic Media does offer a free twenty-four hour trial. This award-winning database offers interviews, insights and, most importantly, contact information, of a number of well-regarded and popular teen authors. There were also listservs, publishers and authors' websites, all with lots of information about young adult authors. It was a combination of all of those resources that led me to Terry Trueman, author of Printz honor book, *Stuck in Neutral*. First, he came recommended

on a listserv to which I subscribed. Next, I checked out his website² and found enormous amounts of helpful information. I emailed his contact listed online and, to my amazement, found myself on the phone with Terry three days later. An hour after that, I had a faxed contract speeding its way to Washington.

Next came the nuts and bolts of the program itself. To be successful, I would have to promote like mad. I managed to squeeze into the local middle schools as much as possible and booktalk *Stuck in Neutral*. Why middle schools? Experience has taught us that sixth graders are by far the most enthusiastic participants for events like this one. I hyped it up to the kids that came to the library on a regular basis. I distributed flyers in the schools and throughout the library. I ordered copies of *Stuck in Neutral* for the kids to read and bring to the program. Note: these were not loaners. These were the students' personal copies to be autographed. Our deal is that a copy of the book is a contract—if a teen receives a book, he or she is obligated to attend the program. The kids take this very seriously and as I handed out more books, my heart began to feel lighter.

Now for the FEED: Do not take this lightly. Food is nearly as vital as the rest of the program when working with teens. In years past, the READ 'N' FEED meant pizza and an author. This year would be no different. I called the local Domino's in Anderson and, with mostly educated guessing, ordered 100 pizzas ahead of time. So I had the food. I had the books. I had the author. I had the promotions. I had scheduled the room and assembled an army of good-natured volunteers. It was game time.

I picked Terry up from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference at the Omni Hotel in Indianapolis. Through rush hour, we sped back to Anderson and once there, I took him to a local restaurant for dinner. Then it was back to the library for introductions and a speech from me about appropriate behavior during a live performance. Once Terry got to the podium, he *owned* that room. Over 100 teens were spellbound for nearly 40 minutes. After that were

questions and, more often than not, hilarious answers and, finally, autographs. The teens were delighted with the signed books, the pizza and the very real and honest author. Terry was pretty happy with the turnout. My colleagues were happy with the success of the program. And I was happy because it was over.

I am now planning another READ 'N' FEED and have a much better handle on the process. Despite all the stress, this program is well worth the effort for many reasons. But there are some advantages to my situation. I work in a very supportive library system that firmly believes in promoting literacy through programs like the READ 'N' FEED. From recent experience, I know that not all systems are this supportive or willing to host such a large program. I'm one of the lucky ones. If you are too, you might remember some of the following advice. And good luck!

- Get your library behind it. I had great administrative support as well as support from everyone else, in and out of the library. My volunteer force that evening consisted of Teen Advisory Board members, circulation staff, the head of human resources as well as the former teen librarian.
- Plan as far in advance as possible. This was something I learned the hard way. I had about eight weeks to pull off a successful program. While that worked, I am currently planning for the READ 'N' FEED scheduled nine months away and am much more at ease.
- Promote like mad. Without the support of the area schools, there would have been a rousing crowd of twelve at the program. With the backing of enthusiastic reading and English teachers, it was smooth sailing. These wonderful resources invited me to classes to speak as well as promoted the program when I was not present.
- Investigate and "piggyback" whenever possible. It was sheer luck that Terry, who lives in Spokane, Washington, was going to be in the area exactly when I needed. Because HarperCollins was paying for him to speak at the NCTE Conference, we were paying for his meals and additional night at a hotel, which is much less expensive than airfare!
- Keep your ears open and check every resource available. I heard Terry was a great speaker from his website and from librarians and media specialists on a list-serv. But before I nabbed him, I was checking out websites, databases, and other librarians. No stone left unturned.
- Remember: this will be fun. This will be fun. This will be fun.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Located at http://www.gem.greenwood.com/products/prod_auth4teen.asp

² <http://www.terrytrueman.com>